

### Teaching sexual images: some pragmatics

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I've been teaching films and videos with sexual content at Northwestern University's Radio/ Television/ Film Department for about twenty years. I started with taboo-breaking films in an experimental film course, but later I developed a graduate level course on sexual representation. This elective class enrolls about fifteen grad students, mostly from RTF but also some from Performance Studies, Theatre, and sometimes Sociology, and it usually enrolls a few seniors as well. Most of the students have seen at least a little moving image hardcore pornography, although some-often female foreign students-have not. It covers basic issues in representing sexuality and gender with examples from advertising, commercial film and broadcasting, phone sex, popular music including music videos, the avant-garde, AIDS education, commercial pornography, and material developed within and circulated to stigmatized sexual subcultures.

It's important to study pornography in the context of the whole spectrum of sexual representation in our culture, so it can be seen as part of a continuum rather than a special ghettoized form. The topics covered include theoretical and historical analyses of sexuality and the body, recent efforts at censorship and control, the "sex wars" debate within feminism, sex education (especially AIDS media), racial images, and pornography as a genre.[1][[open notes in new window](#)] Since most of the students who take the course are RTF majors, students can complete the course with a written paper or creative work. Some of the films/tapes done for the course have gone on to get festival attention and/or been part of MFA portfolios.

The most important thing in teaching that involves highly charged issues such as pornography is to create a classroom atmosphere that promotes mutual learning. I value class discussions in which students can approach differences they may have with trust, tolerance, and respect for each other. I want students to respect diversity. For example, I want to present both sides of the feminist debate on pornography so students can make up their own minds about it. At the same time, I acknowledge at the start that I've written on the subject and taken a clear position opposed to the feminist anti-porn argument. So I can't pretend I'm neutral, but in the classroom I can try to create space for discussion that allows frank expression

of differences on all sides.[2]

One basic rule for the class is that no visitors are allowed. As the course goes on and they've talked about what they've experienced with others, students often want to bring roommates, friends, and lovers to class to see certain films/ videos. However, the presence of a new person changes the group dynamics and inhibits the trust that has been built up in the group. I also advise students at the start that I think they should exercise discretion in attributing personal facts or opinions to a specific classmate when conveying information from our discussions outside the class. I explain that people may say things in the process of discussion that they don't want broadcast around campus and that in discussing issues outside of class with others, it's seldom necessary to identify the speaker. However, I do encourage students to talk about the class with others outside of the class: it helps them get more information, more points of view.

One effective early assignment for the course is to write a report after investigating where one can find sexual images and other material on and off campus and what kind it is. This gives them a freedom to explore which can be helpful for learning; since the reports are shared, it also provides a reference point for later discussion. For example, there isn't any child pornography readily available, despite claims by some anti-porn forces that it is a widespread menace.

I always start the course by providing useful superego justifications for the course. (Telling young people in a still-Puritan culture that they can and should think about sex all the time in order to do well in class accelerates learning.) Having a socially acceptable reason for studying sexual images probably helps some students in processing some material. And it helps them explain the course to others, since to say you're taking (or teaching) a course that shows pornography often brings out (defensive) comic, sniggering, or negative reactions from others. I explain that presenting sexual images is a basic professional issue in media making, and that in working situations professionals often have to make decisions about what to show, how much to show, or whom to address in dealing with sex. I also explain that sexual imagery is a public policy issue in terms of internal and external regulation. And I add that social-political movements have raised controversy around these matters. In addition, the tradition of taboo breaking in the avant-garde is historically important in defining and understanding such work.

I always explain in advance the kind of work that will be screened. I give a short description on the syllabus; I end most classes making a connection to what will be seen in the next class to remind students of what's coming up; and I often make some prefatory remarks to introduce a film or tape. When I first started teaching the course, I didn't do this, thinking that it was important for all the students to see all the different material I was screening.

Gradually I came to understand that through the readings the students do have an introduction to everything in the course, and actually viewing an example of every type and every behavior is not as important. People often need time to digest the new information they're getting in the course, especially about the range of human sexual activities. I respect the student's right to self-selection and volunteering out.

Every course self-selects to some extent. The U.S. university's cafeteria style of course selection provides lots of choices. I'm always somewhat surprised that some students whom I think would register for the course choose not to do so, and others I've considered unlikely to take the class end up registering.

I always announce in the first few classes that it is OK for any student to leave during anything I'm screening. (This also makes it easier for people to sit where they can leave easily if they think they might.) But I ask them to stay in the hall and come back in for the discussion. I also say that I don't think anyone in the class should draw any conclusions from such a classmate's choice. I explain that I've found that dining such a course, people sometimes discover things about themselves or remember things about their own history that are triggered by some of the sounds and images screened.

Image material can cause visceral reactions; pornography is a "body genre" — one that is supposed to evoke a direct physical response. I often explain that I usually cry during the sad scenes in melodramas, and that the most disturbing image materials I ever saw were documentary films used at the Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals, which showed concentration camp atrocities. Once when teaching a documentary film with a birth scene, I had a student literally fall out of his chair, and in an experimental film class another student passed out during a birth film. Films do have the power to upset our emotions and provoke our bodies. When a student or students choose to exit, it serves an important educative function to remind everyone of the power of the images they're viewing and of differences within the group.

Faculty often don't notice when, subtly, they use their own experiences and preferences to manipulate students into accepting cultural objects or practices. In fact, this often broadens the student's outlook and secularizes their understanding of the world. Hearing a professor talk casually about going to the opera, a jazz club, or a poetry reading is an eye opening experience for students whose families or home towns never provided them with such horizons, and the professor's casual reference helps them think they might try it.

I know some people might see letting students choose to leave as making too much of it, acting too protective, not treating students as adults. But my experience is that students often have a tendency to act more sophisticated than they are, especially in a peer group, which is for most of them also an actual or potential dating pool. Group pressure to be hip can also coerce students to be silent, especially those who are uneasy about the practice or ethics of something screened. For me, that's precisely when a discussion should take place. I sometimes have to play devil's advocate to ensure that a fuller discussion is brought out.

Part way through the course, I sometimes solicit anonymous written responses from students on questions they have or topics they would like to have discussed. Related to this is my concern not to dismiss any questions or not listen to any reservations that students may have. Gay male sex is often a starting point for this. Rapidly discussion can become tense when one student makes uninformed statements or uses stereotyped assumptions while other students are openly part of

that sexual subculture. In the class, we are, after all, dealing with stigmatized sexual activities. At the same time, talking about safe sex practices, and explicitly noting when unsafe sex is depicted is a good starting point for some discussions. My course readings include safe sex guidelines and I have a detailed set of such guidelines on my office door.

I tend to use clips from films, especially when dealing with commercial pornography, because I think they usually offer the core material for the discussion at hand. Given the episodic construction of most porn features, and the other characteristics of the genre, narrative and character development are seldom important and often nonexistent. Also, using clips allows for a greater variety in terms of presenting examples from different periods, subcultures, etc. However, I do ask the students to view on their own two heterosexual hardcore features (preferably one shot on film, one shot on video since I lecture on the change from film to video production/ aesthetics/ distribution) and one gay male film of their choice from a video rental stores. I feel that they can then screen the tapes with whatever degree of privacy they need to be comfortable. Basically I want them to get a sense of what goes on in such a film, and given that they are all film students, they can pick up on how the piece is shot and edited, the style of acting, the conventions, etc. very quickly. It's clear that some students (male and female, straight and gay) are fascinated with the porn genre, and others take the assignment as a distasteful or boring necessity. I've had some students simply view the films on fast forward, which denaturalized the viewing enough for them to not be swept up by the raw content.

Although I expect most students to rent their own hardcore tapes, I also provide some on a personal hand-out basis.[3] Part of this is very pragmatic: suburban Evanston where Northwestern is located has video stores which carry heterosexual but not gay porn, so I have some gay porn tapes available so there can be no excuses about availability. Also, it is often more and more difficult to find the titles mentioned in the readings for the course. For example, Linda Williams's book *Hardcore* provides detailed discussion of many shot-on-film titles from the 1970s which are seldom carried in current rental, and few stores carry the Femme or Blush titles. An additional consideration is that for some students, particularly unmarried women from very conservative cultures abroad, it is unthinkable to go and rent hardcore pornography, whereas an appropriate authority figure (the prof) can make the assignment and hand out a tape.

Because *Hardcore* is such an excellent analysis, I've heard of professors who taught it in a film course not specifically on pornography or in a women's studies class, but who were themselves too uneasy with pornography to actually show some and lead a discussion of it in relation to the book. That strikes me as somewhat intellectually irresponsible: as if reading about image material was sufficient to understand it, without actually seeing any images. However, I understand the problem of just parachuting pornography into the middle of a course without context and preparation. In my sexual representation course we are halfway through a ten-week quarter before we get to commercial hardcore pornography and reading Williams' book.

The actual screening of material in class often involves providing additional superego justifications. One of these is medical. The first explicit genital sexual film I show is usually Laird Sutton's TOUCHING.[4] I explain this is an educational film for health care and social work professionals which shows lovemaking by an able woman and a man with a lower spinal cord injury which limits his mobility and genital sensation. I further explain that education for the helping professions has to familiarize people with activities their clients may be involved with. The filmmaker was one of the first to make films for this specific market (Previously medical school education about sex often included illustration by showing stag films; you can imagine what kind of misinformation they conveyed, particularly about women's sexuality).

The film is partially distanced because the couple look like hippies, and the room they use is filled with paisley pillows and other decorations from the 60s counterculture. It is clear that the couple knows each other's bodies very well and what pleasures the other. There is much oral sex, including the woman stimulating the man's rectum. Students typically find this piece so "romantic," and "natural" that I have to point out that they've just witnessed rimming, which I presume most have not participated in, and the film hasn't elicited the negative reactions that often are linked to gay male anal sex. So this piece also sets up a later presentation of gay male sex as not so different after all.

Another superego justification is the course's presenting experimental films with sexual content as examples of art. Since some of these works have been validated by critics, scholars, museums, and so forth as art, students tend to approach them differently than they do commercial pornography, at least initially. (Questioning the high art/low art dichotomy — erotica vs. pornography — is part of my goal in the course.) Another superego justification for students is explaining certain images and activities as examples of minority subcultural expression. Most recently I've done this with a section on leather culture, which segues into presentations on sadomasochism (SM). It's also important, however, to make students sensitive to differences within identify groups. Given the prevailing silence about sexuality and the stigmatization of large parts of it, students need to be aware that not all representations, even when they emerge from a subculture, are accurate about all members of a group. Thus the "girl/ girl" scenes in mainstream bet porn can be easily shown as essentially male fantasy material.[5] But it's also necessary to point out that the "back to nature" romanticism of lesbian feminist filmmaker Barbara Hammer's DYKETACTICS or WOMEN I LOVE is not something that all lesbians easily or positively relate to. Nor is the "strap on a dildo" mode of some of the Blush lesbian-made porn.

Over the years the things that I've screened that have made students uncomfortable (at least to the point of wanting to talk about it) have been images in STIGMATA, a tape on piercing, tattooing, and cuts, particularly close-up shots of how the genital and nipple piercings are done. And a scene from CANDYSTRIPEERS of a fist and most of an arm inserted in a woman's vagina. The biggest controversy I ever had was after screening an AIDS education tape about negotiating safe sex. One section showed a het couple passionately making out, but when they realized

they didn't have condoms, the guy just left. The implication that penis/ vagina penetration was necessary to complete intercourse and thereby have pleasurable sex was fiercely challenged by some students who argued for a wide and safe variety of other ways of achieving orgasm for both partners. This incident also emphasized how slowly the social codes around sexual activity change.

To some extent in teaching I benefit from the privilege that accrues to a tenured, married, heterosexual, middle aged white male. The last time I taught the course I had the opportunity to have some graduate students who were working on their dissertations present some of their research in the class. Ilene Goldman discussed Helmut Newton's photography of women based on interviews she had done with him. Audrey Colby discussed her participant-observation study of a women's "Sluts and Goddesses" workshop run by pornographer and performance artist Annie Sprinkle, Anna McCarthy presented her article on phone sex, and Terri Kapsalis elaborated her article on gynecological images. Also, my RTF department colleague, Laura Kipnis, discussed her videotape on the capitalist commodification of sexuality, ECSTASY UNLIMITED (which was screened), and her essays on *Hustler* magazine, she/male images and fat pornography.[7]

My course has changed over time. In the early 80s it seemed important to spend a lot of time on the debates within feminism on pornography. At the end of the decade, the question of censorship, especially around the Mapplethorpe controversy seemed more important. In the early 90s, feminist-produced pornography was a hot topic. Currently, I want to cover the debate about sex on the Internet.

I've never been satisfied with how I've taught issues of race and sex in this course. In pornography the obvious topics are clear: showing racist stereotypes such as the rape sequence in BEHIND THE GREEN DOOR; presenting yet another example of sex tourism in the current crop of "gonzo documentaries" (such as the BUTTMAN IN BRAZIL series); demonstrating erasure, such as the non-appearance of Asian men in het porn.

However, I've yet to find very plausible discussions of sexual desire that crosses race boundaries in terms of both representation and identification.[8] For example, if we say the obvious, that black and asian women are exotic Others for the straight white male gaze, we still haven't accounted for such identification in watching a black male actor engaged with a black or white woman. Or straight black male viewing or women's spectatorship of the same scene. The race and gender issues of such pornographic spectatorship are at once the most obvious and the most studiously avoided questions in recent film theory's engagement with "subject positioning" and spectatorship.

The emphasis on topics changes, but the fundamental need to develop an adequate analysis of the power of sexual images remains an important reason for offering the class.

NOTES

1. For a detailed description of a somewhat similar course, see Chris Straayer, "Sexual Representation in Film and Video," *Multiple Voices in Feminist Criticism*, ed. Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar, and Janice Welsh (Minneapolis: U of Minn. Press, 1994), 503-512.
2. Actually a consistent criticism I've received in student course evaluations is that I give too much attention to the feminist anti-porn position, given that many students find the Dworkin-MacKinnon writings long on rhetoric, short on thought, and too repetitive.
3. I provide students with some suggestions for titles. For example, DEBBIE DOES DALLAS or DEBBIE DUZ DISHES (aka BLAZING MATTRESSES no. 1) are comedies which new viewers may find more acceptable than the abduction/ rape story at the heart of BEHIND THE GREEN DOOR, which also contains a particularly racist stereotype of an African American man who rapes the white heroine. (I do sometimes show a clip from this scene to demonstrate extreme racism in some examples of the genre.) Similarly with gay porn: outsiders usually find romantic films such as BOYS IN THE SAND, which features hunky couples, easier to take than the anonymous orgy sleaze of L.A. TOOL AND DIE. (A clip from the latter is good for explicating sleaze as an important erotic/ aesthetic category in considering porn.)

A good mail order source for a somewhat select range of tapes is the feminist sex toy store Good Vibrations (catalogue \$4.00), 1210 Valencia, San Francisco CA 94110.

4. 1972, 17 mm. film. Multi-Media Resource Center, San Francisco.
5. Which doesn't mean that they are not a turn on for some heterosexual women and some lesbians.
6. Anna McCarthy, "Reach Out and Touch Someone: Technology and Sexuality in Broadcast Ads for Phone Sex," *Velvet Light Trap* no. 32, Fall 1993; Terri Kapsalis, "Public 'Privates' and the Gynecological Image," *Public* no. 8, 1993, pp. 184-203.
7. Laura Kipnis, "(Male) Desire and (Female) Disgust: Reading *Hustler*," in Kipnis, *Ecstasy Unlimited: On Sex, Capital, Gender, and Aesthetics* (Minneapolis: U of Minn. Press, 1993), 219-241. "She-Male Fantasies and the Aesthetics of Pornography," in *Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography, Power*, ed. Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson (London: British Film Institute, 1993), 124-143. "Life in the Fat Lane," in Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (New York: Grove, 1996), pp 93-121. The video ECSTASY UNLIMITED (60 mm.) is distributed by the Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago.
8. As usual, the most interesting pertinent discussions have come from queer and feminist theorists, such as: Richard Fung, "Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Male Porn," in *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991); Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New*

*Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Christopher Ortiz, "Hot and Spicy: Representation of Chicano/Latino Men in Gay Pornography," *Jump Cut* no. 39 (June 1994) 83-90; B. Ruby Rich, "When Difference Is (More Than) Skin Deep," in *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*, ed. Martha Gever, John Greyson, and Pratibha Parmar (NY: Routledge, 1993); Jane Gaines, "Competing Glances: Who Is Reading Robert Mapplethorpe's *Black Book*?" *New Formations* no. 16 (Spring 1992): 24-39; and Gaines, "Feminist Heterosexuality and Its Politically Incorrect Pleasures," *Critical Inquiry* 21 (Winter 1995), 382-410.

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